

critical ages the conscious encroaches; till men hyperpetual thinking of their thoughts lose their imaginative originality and try to replace it by cold-blooded eccentricity.

Still, this is not an objection on which great stress can be laid. Critics will not cease criticising, and the public will not cease paying them for it, just because they cramp creative writers. And after all an author of any real force will triumph over this difficulty, as Flaubert himself did. Demosthenes will learn to speak, even with a pebble in his mouth. It is the hampering effect of too much criticism on the very public which it pretends to help, that seems to me a more serious indictment.

To begin with, too critical an attitude is liable to destroy the spontaneity of a reader's response. Moliere read his plays to an old woman; so, centuries before, on the other side of the world, did Po-chu-i with his poems. They were not merely being capricious. They knew what they were about. Watch a cultivated audience at a play, in London or Cambridge, and listen to their conversation in the intervals—the febrile, intellectual snobbery, the desire to attract attention by some peculiar view, the assertion of superiority by some contemptuous epigram, the slavish fear of backing the wrong horse and praising where it may prove smarter to have sneered. It is all very entertaining, but also a little nauseous. The

naked human
rage for superiority is not pretty, when its
wrappings of
politeness slip down and leave it bare. No
doubt, in a far
less critical society this tendency would still
in some de-
gree be there. 'Plus il y a d'hommes
ensemble, plus ils
sont vains, et sentent naître en eux l'envie
de se signaler
par de petites choses.' But the present age
seems to suffer
particularly from this malady. Madame du
Deffand
divided mankind into 'trompeurs, trompes,
et trompettes':
we are deafened with the last.